Last winter an unusual amount of news came out of that crossroads of continents, the Near East. What is going on there?

NEAR EAST CONFLICTS

THE problems resulting in the nineteenth century from the break-up of the Turkish Empire's position in the Balkans are paralleled in the twentieth century by the troubles arising from the demolition of Turkish rule in the Near East during the Great War. Originally, Britain had hoped to inherit all Near Eastern possessions of the Ottoman Empire outside of Turkey proper. But in the Sykes-Picot Agreement (May 9/16, 1916) Britain—most reluctantly—promised part of them to France. After the war, Syria, which had formed an entity as long as it was under Turkish rule, was split up into the Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Transjordania. The promised independence was diluted to mandates, with France becoming the mandatory power of the former two, Britain of the latter two. London was not very pleased with this situation and pulled the strings of some of the rebellions against the French which the latter had to quell by force.

THE LEBANON

The collapse of her ally in 1940 gave Britain a chance to unhinge the French position in the Levant. By means of the Syrian campaign carried out in 1941 with the support of De Gaullist forces against the French forces loyal to Marshal Pétain, Britain gained control in that area. The British as well as De Gaulle promised independence to Syria and the Lebanon: the British because they hoped to undermine the French position and pave the way for the incorporation of these countries in a Pan-Arabian federation of British conception, De Gaulle because he wished to gain the support of the population of these countries and alienate it from the Vichy Government, while still retaining the French mandate. The result was a latent conflict over the interpretation of the independence to be granted. Egged on by the British, the Lebanese Government proposed in November 1943 to abrogate the constitution —which had been imposed by the French—as inconsistent with the status of an independent state. This step was answered by the French High Commissioner with the arrest of the President and the members of the Government and Parliament of Lebanon. London was now in a position to play its favorite part of "protector of the weak" and pressed De Gaulle, at that time still in Algiers, to make concessions and reinstate the arrested Lebanese leaders. Although temporarily allayed, the problem was not solved.

The sorest question is that of a Lebanese army. The Lebanese Government claims that there can be no question of independence unless the country has an army of its own. De Gaulle's reluctance to grant this request led to serious tension early this year, accompanied by widespread demonstrations on the part of the population. The most interesting aspect of this conflict was London's unfavorable reaction when De Gaulle declared that France refused to abdicate from her position of predominance in the Levant.

Having concluded his pact with Stalin, De Gaulle wants France to act the part of a great power in the Near East, too. While compelled during his period of exile to concede independence to Lebanon and Syria, he must now reassert his authority by force.

TWO NEWCOMERS, TWO OLDTIMERS

Yet it is not the French that the British are worrying about. There are other, heavier balls Downing Street must juggle with. In contrast to the period following upon the Great War, when she was the undisputed mistress of the Mediterranean, England is now on the defensive in the Near East. At that time there was only France in the running, while Italy was exhausted and the Soviet Union a field for foreign intervention. Today Britain is the weakest of the Big Three, and the two giants to whom she is allied are casting covetous glances at the Near East. Both the USA and the USSR enjoy the advantage of being at liberty to pursue an opportunist policy; for them it is not, as for Britain, a question of existence, but of more power.

Another problem to worry Britain is the antagonism between Arabs and Jews. In order to win the Arabs for her own ends, England has supported their aspirations for a Pan-Arabian federation. This movement gained momentum after its first conference in Alexandria in October 1944 and is vehemently opposed to Jewish immigration into Palestine and any formation of an alien state on Arab soil. At the same time, the hands of the British are tied by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised the Jews a "national home" in Palestine. They cannot disavow it unless they are prepared to lose Jewish support. The restraint with which the assassination of Lord Moyne by Jewish terrorists (6.11.44) was handled was symptomatic of Britain's caution. In the past, the Jewish-Arabian antagonism served to sustain British rule and influence, just as that

between Hindus and Mohammedans did in India. The growth of the Pan-Arabian spirit has, however, stimulated a nationalism which may become less tractable or be exploited by another of the competing powers. Thus Britain may be compelled to side with one of the two antagonists, and this was indeed suggested recently by General Spears, MP and until recently British Minister to Syria and the Lebanon, who advocated greater consideration of the Arab point of view :

The question of Palestine is of major importance to the Arabs, who contest the right of Jews to their land, and "their" land is any of the vast territories inhabited by 60,000,000 Arabs.

And if we raised our eyebrows at this, would not the Arab ask (as he does ask) what would our attitude be if the position were reversed? Supposing an outside authority decided that an unlimited number of Arabs be settled in Canada, would there be no agitation in Britain? Would not even the United States, apparently such ardent Zionists today, wonder whether unlimited immigration might not affect them? Would they throw open their frontiers to strangers?

OIL AND DIPLOMATS

The USA is probably a less dangerous rival for Britain than the USSR. Apart from the distance separating America from the Near East, Roosevelt's championing of the Zionist cause conflicts with the American aspirations for oil, which can only be obtained by co-operation with the Arabs. The business interests of the big American oil concerns do not always tally with Government interests, one of several reasons why the grandiose 150-million dollar pipe-line scheme, the sensation of early 1944, was shelved. The dangerous proximity of the Soviet Union may also commend an Anglo-American understanding to Washington. Churchill's and Roosevelt's visit to the Near East after the Yalta Conference seem to suggest an understanding of that kind. The negotiations pursued there with the Kings of Egypt and Saudi-Arabia, the Negus, and the President of Syria, indicate that Britain is prepared to admit the USA as a junior partner in the fostering of a British-controlled Pan-Arabian federation, France being excluded altogether. This is a partial explanation for De Gaulle's refusal to meet President Roosevelt in Algiers. How far the USA will back the plans of Downing Street, remains to be seen. However, Anglo-American co-operation has already resulted in declarations of war against Germany and Japan on the part of several Near Eastern countries which wish to assure themselves of admission tickets to the forthcoming San Francisco conference.

America has, of course, not been idle in seeking her own advantages. In the competition for the Near Eastern oil fields, her holdings have risen from some 15 per cent in 1939 to about 35 to 40 per cent in 1944; she has also pushed the construction of airfields in preparation for postwar air-line competition.

A lasting accord between England and the USSR can hardly be visualized. The Near East lies right in front of the Soviet Union, a gateway to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, to Africa and India. The Kremlin's participation in the scramble for Iranian and Arabian oil is only one move in a greater game, not an end in itself as in the case of the USA. Other moves are the recent dispatch of diplomatic and consular representatives, many of them Mohammedans, to Egypt, Syria, the Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine; the increased activity of the Soviet Embassy in Teheran—whose personnel now exceeds 200—and in Cairo, where a Soviet military mission for the Near East has made its headquarters; the inception of broadcasts in Arabic from Moscow in June of last year; the purchase of Suez Canal shares; the pilgrimage of Mohammedans from the USSR to Mecca; the support given to De Gaulle; the backing of Communist parties; the interference in the internal affairs of Iran; and the advance toward the Mediterranean via the Balkans.

Greece has provided Britain with a bitter taste of what she may expect along her life line to the Indian Ocean. Ninety years ago, England was in a position to forge a mighty coalition against an expanding Russia and to curb her by a concerted attack during the Crimean War. Who will now stand by Britain in her defense against the aggressive USSR, which need not weigh political, military, economic, and other considerations as cautiously as Britain must in view of the complicated structure of her Empire?

Compared to this great struggle of the giants, which has yet to reach its climax, the present dispute between De Gaulle and the Levantine states is only a side show, but one which is causing apprehension in England. General Spears put it squarely when he said in London the other day: "It is greatly to be feared that the French, having embarked on a policy of ill-disguised pressure, will pursue that course. If they do, it is highly probable that the whole Middle East will be aflame. In that disastrous eventuality it is not the French who will suffer most. They will merely lose finally what they have half lost already; but British prestige will suffer a disastrous setback, and our position in an area vital to us will be in jeopardy."